

19 March 1987

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 68

Panels to Grant Immunity to Six In Iran Inquiry

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Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
WASHINGTON — House and Senate committees investigating the Iran-Contra affair voted to grant immunity to six more witnesses and moved to make the U.S. role in the Nicaraguan war the early focus of joint public hearings beginning in May.

The grants of immunity were designed to persuade the individuals—including several who were prominent in a private Contra supply network—to testify. The supply network was directed from within the National Security Council during a period in which Congress had prohibited U.S. military aid to the Contras, as the Nicaraguan rebels are known.

Under an agreement reached with Lawrence Walsh, the independent counsel investigating the affair, the congressional panels also will vote next month to grant limited immunity to John Poindexter, former national security adviser. Investigators could begin interviewing Adm. Poindexter privately a few days before the scheduled start of hearings May 5.

Committee members said the decision to focus the first hearings on the U.S. role in Nicaragua was dictated in part by the chronology of events. But it also has political importance because it will influence how the entire Iran-Contra affair is cast in the months ahead.

The private network assisting the Contras pre-dated any diversion of funds from U.S. weapons sales to Iran, and investigators believe the scandal can only be understood in this context.

Moreover, by securing Adm. Poindexter's early testimony, the committees hope to determine whether President Reagan approved the creation of the private network to aid the Contras and whether he knew about the National Security Council's role in directing it. Adm. Poindexter was head of the NSC, a branch of the White House.

"The diversion of funds from the Iran arms sales is only a part of the puzzle, and maybe a very small part," a congressional source said. "We first want to focus on how the private network which supplied the Contras got set up in 1984, and whether (President) Reagan authorized it."

Intelligence and congressional sources said William Casey, former Central Intelligence Agency director, appears to have been one of the architects of the private aid program. They said Mr. Casey directed some of his subordinates to help Lt. Col. Oliver North, fired NSC aide, supply arms to Iran and aid to the Contras.

Separately, intelligence sources said a report by the CIA's inspector general concluded that officials at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., and at CIA stations in Europe and Central America helped funnel aid to the Contras despite a CIA directive to avoid violating the congressional ban at that time on aid to the insurgents.

The congressional committees so far have approved grants of immunity for 10 people. The six approved for immunity yesterday include a former NSC aide, Lt. Col. Robert Earl, and two participants in the private Contra supply network, Robert Owen and retired Air Force Lt. Col. Richard Gadd.

Col. Gadd is a close associate of retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard Secord. Apart from his role in the private airlift of supplies to assist the Contras, Col. Gadd controls a series of Virginia companies that have received classified contracts from the government for clandestine operations.

Sources said the committees voted to grant immunity to two of Col. Gadd's past employees, including a retired noncommissioned officer in military special operations.

Gen. Secord appears increasingly isolated in the investigation. The Senate panel voted yesterday to initiate civil contempt proceedings against him in an effort to force him to turn over bank records important to the inquiry. The measure must next be taken up by the full Senate, where it is expected to be approved promptly. But the process may be overtaken by events, since investigators hope to obtain much of the same information elsewhere.

Albert Hakim, a business partner of Gen. Secord, is believed to have access to many of the same records. The committees last week voted to grant Mr. Hakim immunity, but Mr. Walsh has since indicated that he objects to that move. The prosecutor's objections legally ensure him only of winning a 20-day delay before immunity is granted, however.

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